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AF remains committed to AEF rotation cycles

by Tech Sgt. Tim Dougherty, Air Force Print News

WASHINGTON — The combination of America's war on terrorism and steady state commitments worldwide has put increased strain on the Air Force's aerospace expeditionary forces. However, except for a few stressed career fields, officials at the Pentagon say normal rotations should be back soon.

"Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John P. Jumper is committed to the AEF construct — a three-month deployment with a 12-month period at home," said Maj. Gen. Jeffrey B. Kohler, director of operational plans, deputy chief of staff for air and space operations.

"Given the war on terrorism, we had to go through a momentary blip in our rotation schedule," he said. "However, it looks like we're going to be on time in bringing home about 90 percent of the people who are currently deployed. We will rotate the forces deployed for operations Enduring Freedom, Northern Watch, and Southern Watch so that those who deployed first will be allowed to rotate home first to the maximum extent possible."

There are some exceptions, Kohler said. While Air Force leaders are working hard to come up with a solution, a very small number of career fields may not be able to rotate as scheduled, he said.

"We know that there are some stressed career fields, such as security forces, combat communications and firefighters, that might have to stay a little longer," Kohler said. "But that's not to say that absolutely everyone in those career fields will be staying longer."

The deployment picture will start to come into focus by the middle of February when the Air Force begins scheduling for the rotation in March, he said.

"It might work out that only one or two unit type codes out of an entire civil engineering squadron might be the stressed career field," Kohler said. "We just don't know yet because we haven't gotten down to that level of fidelity."

The tremendous performance of the AEF in Operation Enduring Freedom is what caused the stress on certain career fields in the first place, Kohler said.

"The Air Force is sort of a victim of its own success," Kohler said. "The reason we are stressed is simple — we do such a great job. We went out and set up these bases and started generating sorties as soon as we were asked. I think the results speak for themselves in the war on terrorism in Afghanistan. The (U.S.) Central Command commander in chief could not have done what he did without the superb work of all the airmen who went out and set it up."

To ease the problems the Air Force has in stressed career fields under current requirements, about 10 percent of the people will stay deployed a little longer — some up to 135 days; others, up to 179 days, Kohler said. To cover the overlap, the second part of the solution will be to reach into the next AEF and bring replacement unit type codes forward about 45 days. Any reduction in current requirements may get the AEF cycle on track a little bit quicker, he said.

Another way to relieve some of the burden on our deployed people is to find additional airmen who normally do not deploy and place them in an AEF library.

"This crisis has caused us to look a little bit deeper," Kohler said. "We'd like to be able to find people who we haven't originally had in an AEF library who can deploy but normally don't deploy. For example, Air Education and Training Command has instructors who have special skill sets, and the AETC leadership has said that there may be periods in the year when they can rotate. This is just one example and we're looking at all options."

Other fixes for stressed career fields are going to take some time and may only be resolved with increased manpower. Although the Air Force has asked for an end-strength increase of about 22,000 with 7,000 requested for this year, because of training requirements, this is more of a long-term solution, Kohler said.

"This is an extraordinary time for the Air Force and our country," Jumper recently told commanders. "The nation is grateful for the sacrifices our airmen continue to make in meeting our commitments to fight

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the war on terrorism and defend the American homeland. The secretary and I are proud of the job you are doing and we are personally committed to maintaining the AEF rotation schedule to the greatest possible extent.” @